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New York

President	Mr. Yel'chenko	(Ukraine)
Members	Bangladesh	Mr. Amin
	China	Mr. Shen Guofang
	Colombia	Mr. Valdivieso
	France	Mr. Levitte
	Ireland	Mr. Cooney
	Jamaica	Miss Durrant
	Mali	Mr. Ouane
	Mauritius	Mr. Neewoor
	Norway	Mr. Kolby
	Russian Federation	Mr. Karev
	Singapore	Mr. Mahbubani
	Tunisia	Mr. Jerandi
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Sir Jeremy Greenstock
	United States of America	Mr. Cunningham

Agenda

The situation along the borders of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone

Briefing by Mr. Ruud Lubbers, High Commissioner for Refugees.

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01-27901 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 3.50 p.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation along the borders of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone

Briefing by Mr. Ruud Lubbers, High Commissioner for Refugees

The President: I should like to inform the Council that I have received a letter from the representative of Guinea in which he requests to be invited to participate in the discussion of the item on the Council's agenda. In conformity with the usual practice, I propose, with the consent of the Council, to invite that representative to participate in the discussion, without the right to vote, in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Charter and rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

At the invitation of the President, Mr. Fall (Guinea) took a seat at the Council table.

The President: In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, and in the absence of objection, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Ruud Lubbers, the High Commissioner for Refugees.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

I invite Mr. Lubbers to take a seat at the Council table.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda. The Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

At this meeting, the Security Council will hear a briefing by Mr. Ruud Lubbers, the High Commissioner for Refugees.

Before I give him the floor, I would like, on behalf of all of us, to welcome the Secretary-General, who has joined us for today's meeting.

I now give the floor to Mr. Lubbers.

Mr. Lubbers: Thank you for inviting me, Mr. President.

Today is International Women's Day. I would therefore like to begin with a tribute to women in general but, as the Council will understand, to refugee women in particular: to widows and mothers of children — of boys, who may become child soldiers, and of girls, who are not seldom victims of rape or who are at risk of being victims of prostitution or sexual exploitation; to mothers who will have to build a new life, empowering themselves and their children — their sons and daughters; and to women who will set the right priorities in Africa and all over the world: no violence, no arms trade, no further killings, and no further degradation of the environment. On behalf of those refugee women, during my mission in West Africa I claimed the right to safe and free access to refugees and the right of safe passage for refugees.

During my mission I claimed and promoted safe access to, and safe passage for, refugees. Through the Secretary-General, the President has received a report of that mission that I submitted to the Secretary-General in a letter dated 21 February. I will of course not repeat all the things I wrote in that report.

With regard to Guinea, I would like to say that, in general, cooperation with the Guinean authorities and the army has improved. To save time, I will distribute an update on main developments concerning the relocation exercise, relocation sites and the situation in the Languette region. From that update the Council will see that there has been considerable improvement in terms of the numbers of people we were able to help to relocate, that new sites are developing, and that we have safe access to the sites thanks to cooperation with the Government and army of Guinea.

Lastly, as will be recalled from my letter, the situation in the Languette region is a very isolated one. But in the last two weeks we were finally able to take food in and to help those who had to get out to do so. The paper I distributed provides more details in this regard.

I would now like to make a few remarks about Sierra Leone. I know the Council knows of my letter of 21 February, but has happened since then?

With the concurrence of President Kabbah, the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) and the Office of the United Nations High

Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) together realized, via the Contact Group, initial contacts and results with the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) regarding the principles of safe access and passage.

In my letter of 21 February I made one remark about the RUF. At that time I preferred to maintain confidentiality. I can now disclose the first elements of the action plan on the RUF. It reads as follows:

> "UNHCR, via the Contact Group, invites RUF to relate to the agreement that has been already endorsed by the Presidents of Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia on the following points: first, safe access to refugees; secondly, safe passage for refugees; and thirdly, condemnation of any act that would obstruct or hinder these principles.
>
> "Assuming that RUF is also ready to comply with the above three principles, UNHCR also requests the RUF to make a declaration regarding refraining from taking any actions on the Guinean territory."

This message went via the Contact Group to the RUF. At least up until today, it seems to be functioning. Beyond that, we signalled to the RUF that as soon as they were able to make a public statement to adopt this as their formal policy, we would use our good offices to invite the Government of Guinea to refrain from all military actions in the area of Kambia so that the road from Forecariah to Kambia could become a safe passage for the return of refugees from Guinea to Sierra Leone.

This action plan — the first part of it — has started to function and has been the basis for our contacts with the RUF for the past three weeks. It was crucial for the safe access to, and the safe passage of, refugees in Guinea — I stress, in Guinea — especially to and from the Languette region. By and large, the principles — to which I refer to as "safe access to and safe passage of" — are being respected not only by the three countries, but also by the RUF. The efforts to convince them to refrain from action on the territory of Guinea have, until now, proven to be successful. This has had positive effects on the situation in Guinea. It has also contributed to better working relations between UNAMSIL and the RUF.

Beyond that — and this is something that is very relevant to the Council — this is in fact a real beginning of the successful implementation of the mandate. I draw special attention to paragraph 8 of resolution 1270 (1999), in which we can see that the goals laid out by the mandate are fully in line with these recent developments. Safe access to, and safe passage of, refugees proved to be of importance not only for refugees, but also functions as a confidence-building mechanism and, in so doing, creates new windows of opportunity.

But Sierra Leone is still fragile and very vulnerable. One has to proceed cautiously and step-by-step. The next step will be to prepare what is needed so that the road from Forecariah to Kambia can become a safe passage for the return of refugees from Guinea to Sierra Leone and then, of course, from the whole area. I have indications that the Government of Guinea, with its army, is prepared to ensure security along that road up to the border while at the same time — and I am now speaking about Guinea —refraining from all military activity — shelling, incursions and the like — on the other side of the border.

At this moment, the other side of the border is RUF-dominated territory. But I have also received indications that the RUF is prepared to leave the Kambia area in order that it may become territory under the control of UNAMSIL. However, UNAMSIL is still too weak at this moment to fulfil that function. It will be able to fulfil that function only once it is strengthened. I realize that is not an easy thing, but it is rather key; because opening the road from Forecariah to Kambia is, in my reading, a responsible act only if it can be done in such a way that the area is no longer RUF-dominated country. That can be guaranteed only once UNAMSIL goes in with sufficient strength.

So this is exactly what I would like to ask the Council: to strengthen the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) and to provide sufficient troops with a robust mandate. I ask this on behalf of the refugees. It is key for them. It is key for the refugees who want to return. That will be only a first step, of course. But in my reading, it is also key for the stability and future of Sierra Leone.

I would like to make a few additional remarks. If UNAMSIL is strengthened to the extent that it controls the Kambia area, a number of refugees who wish to do so will be able to return home. However, the numbers will be limited. But even with these limited numbers, this will diminish the burden of internally

displaced persons in Freetown and, for that matter, of refugees in Guinea.

The second thing I want to stress is that refugees returning to the Kambia area will not return to areas dominated by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). They will return only if UNAMSIL is in control. Of course, all this has to be checked and rechecked in pursuing this course. But in my reading, in any case, strengthening UNAMSIL is now the first priority, and then UNAMSIL can look into the real situation, and when it is safe enough, do its job.

Another subject I want to talk about is poverty and the need for assistance in Sierra Leone. All over Sierra Leone, including in the RUF-dominated part, the time has come to prioritize humanitarian needs. Prudence, yes; but action — really doing something in connection with the humanitarian needs — is needed.

Mr. President, you asked me to come and brief the Council further in connection with the report the Council received earlier. In that connection, I shall say a few words on the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and Liberia. The letter of 21 February relates the situation on that day. Since then the sanctions on Liberia have been adopted — yesterday, if my information is correct. The ECOWAS initiative that was very much alive in those days has not materialized. It might be revived, possibly in another form. We will see.

In relation to ECOWAS, I have only a few remarks for the record, because in the aforementioned letter I mentioned discussions and some suggestions made three weeks ago to President Konaré. This could be useful for the future, although not very relevant today. Therefore, I am saying this for the record. One suggestion was the deployment of available military capacity in the territory of Liberia, at the border with Guinea between the point where the boundaries of Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia meet each other up to the area of Zorzor, Liberia. Why was this suggestion made? Because it was very clear that Guinea could not accept ECOWAS troops on its own territory and, at the same time, it was building on the willingness of President Taylor of Liberia to accept ECOWAS troops on Liberian territory. The concentration of such a force — one not dispersed along a wide distance but rather very concentrated on that particular part of the border — could produce — together with what is happening in the Languette and the refraining from action on the part of the RUF — a more coherent approach leading to safety and stability.

Now, as we all know, the Guinea ECOWAS initiative did not materialize. Maybe it will come back one day, perhaps under different conditions. But from my perspective, it would be important to see these initiatives also in relation to developments in the three countries and the refugee situation. By the way, there are 100,000 Liberian refugees in Guinea waiting to return home. There are, of course, many aspects involved here. In general, we at UNHCR accept the free choice of refugees to go whenever they want to go. But one thing is certain: if some day the situation stabilizes enough for them to go home, then a safe passage is needed from Macenta to Foya in Lofa county. That would relate exactly to the suggestion I made earlier to the President of Mali.

By the way, the Presidents of Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia, as well as President Konaré of Mali, had these ideas earlier. I just want to share them with you today at this briefing.

In order not to speak too long, I have a few concluding remarks. First, our practical work is important for us. We of UNHCR have strengthened our presence in the area; we are providing a lot of assistance; and it costs a lot of money. So I will go to the donor countries once again and ask them for $20 or $30 million additional so that we can continue our activities.

I want to repeat what I said earlier, which is that although we are trying to make the situation better for the refugees, as far as the practical choices to be made are concerned, it is up to the refugees themselves to decide whether things are safe enough to go home.

Finally, I made a trip to the three countries in the region and to the Chair of ECOWAS. I urged the Presidents of those three countries, after 10 years of misery, 10 years of violence and endless numbers of refugees, at this time to prioritize putting an end to violence, to provide human security, and to do that by observing the principles of the protection of refugees, in the form of safe access to refugees and safe passage of refugees. From there on, one could build on further efforts aimed at more durable solutions for all refugees in the area.

That was the message I wanted to convey there, Mr. President. If you will allow me to express the

message here, it is a more practical one — that is, to make it possible for them to assist in fulfilling these priorities. I think it is essential to make it possible from here, and that is the reason I explained the situation as it is developing, and it is the reason for coming here to your Security Council, especially as regards the role of UNAMSIL and the need for strengthening its capacity to fulfil its mandate.

The President: I thank Mr. Lubbers for his briefing.

I shall now give the floor to the members of the Council.

Ms. Durrant (Jamaica): On behalf of the Jamaican delegation, I wish to welcome Mr. Ruud Lubbers, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, to the Security Council today. I wish to thank him for his very comprehensive briefing on the humanitarian situation in West Africa and for presenting the findings of his mission to Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia, as well as for giving us some food for thought.

He began with the recognition of today as International Women's Day, and I wish to thank him for focusing on refugee women.

Women have become, with children, the largest group of persons affected by armed conflict. And, within the framework of the Security Council's responsibility for international peace and security, the question of the protection of civilians has become a very important problem. In fact, yesterday when we were discussing in the Council the follow-up to the Millennium Declaration by the heads of State and Government, I drew attention to the fact that we would be meeting with Mr. Lubbers today to explore just how the international community could assist with the situation in West Africa — particularly the situation in the "parrot's beak" area of Guinea, where some 135,000 persons are facing a severe risk to their lives.

The Security Council's mission to the region last October and its meeting with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) ministers on 12 February emphasize that a regional approach to the crisis, entailing specific criteria for action, has to be a priority. We are pleased that the High Commissioner has adopted a similar approach. The flow of refugees across the Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone borders has fuelled what he himself described as the most serious refugee situation in the world, with some half a million refugees caught up in a spiral of violence, insecurity, inaccessibility and poverty.

The indiscriminate attacks, looting and the destruction and burning of civilian property have also affected the ability to distribute food aid in the affected areas. Moreover, the frequency of cross-border attacks poses a constant threat to the security of refugees and internally displaced persons, as well as humanitarian workers.

The High Commissioner pointed out to us that we needed to look at this matter in two phases. First of all, we must look at the emergency situation, which is part of the mandate of the High Commissioner for Refugees to protect refugees. That is the most important part of mandate of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). We would also need to look at the long-term solution, and, as the High Commissioner pointed out, peace and security can only be brought to the region if we are able to provide a political solution. Therefore, we wish to thank him for the ideas that he has put forward for consideration by the Council and the meetings that he has had with the Presidents of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, as well as with President Konaré of Mali, the Chair of ECOWAS, because again we wish to emphasize that a solution will have to come with the full cooperation of the regional organization and the countries concerned.

As far as the emergency situation is concerned, we have taken note of the paper provided by the High Commissioner on the relocation exercise and the relocation sites. But, we are concerned particularly about the fact that the paper states that relocating the estimated 135,000 refugees currently in the Languette region will take considerable time and that the UNHCR is looking into various possibilities, including having the most able walk in an organized manner up to Kenema.

The paper says that they would use way stations along the way, provided that the security situation remains calm. To us, this is of very serious concern because all reports indicate that the fighting is continuing and that these refugees are at risk. So, we would wish to ask the High Commissioner exactly what time-frame he expects he will need in order to be able to address the removal and relocation of these refugees.

It seems to my delegation that we might again have to call on the good offices and the support of the Guinean authorities to again provide safe havens for these persons further inland. We recognize that for many years Guinea has provided refugees with safe havens, refugees fleeing conflict in neighbouring countries, and that today the situation has worsened and the fighting has intruded into Guinea itself. But, we are concerned that if time is of the essence and if something is not done quickly and speedily, the refugees in the Languette will become more statistics. We therefore urge the High Commissioner to develop an emergency plan for the relocation of these refugees.

As far as a long-term solution is concerned, the fact that the Security Council has not been able to expand the numbers of persons and the troops needed to strengthen the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) is a matter of concern for us. We agree with the High Commissioner that the key for stability and the future of Sierra Leone is to bring the activities of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) to an end. We therefore agree with him that it is very important for the Security Council, with ECOWAS and with UNAMSIL, to seek to have the RUF fulfil the terms of the Security Council resolutions. We are also concerned that when the refugees return to Sierra Leone and become internally displaced persons there will have to be reception facilities and assistance provided for them so that they can be reintegrated into their communities. We recognize that, as Mr. Lubbers said, refugees will not return to areas dominated by the RUF.

In conclusion, I wish again to thank the High Commissioner for bringing us this report, for describing his meetings and for providing suggestions for action by the Council. We look forward to working with him as he seeks to carry out his mandate to protect civilians affected by armed conflict.

Sir Jeremy Greenstock (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland): I would like to give a warm welcome to the High Commissioner. It is an extremely important briefing at an extremely important time. It is very good to see him come back to the Security Council so quickly.

May I also echo his reference to International Women's Day. As the first male member of the Security Council speaking this afternoon, I think that I can acknowledge on behalf of all my male colleagues that if women were able to achieve — to be strengthened to achieve — what they want to achieve in areas of crisis and desperation and in the way that they wanted, then the world would be a much safer and more peaceful place. The Security Council needs to continue to respond to the needs of women, as we have said in our public statement today.

We very much welcome Mr. Lubbers' visit to the region and the recent progress made by the High Commissioner for Refugees and other agencies in resuming food deliveries and other forms of care, particularly in the Languette region, and in their attempts to start a movement of refugees and internally displaced persons out of that dangerous area in particular. We very much welcome the renewed commitment of the Government of Guinea to host refugees from neighbouring countries and to provide them with protection. It is an enormous responsibility for the State of Guinea and for the Government of Guinea to have such a high proportion of refugees on its territory, and we pay tribute to what the Government has done.

Of course, the Security Council has to ask for all parties involved to end the violence. There are rebel groups that should not be doing what they are doing in and across the borders in this region of West Africa. The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) has been taking action it certainly should not have. There are rebel groups targeting the security of Liberia, as well as of Guinea and Sierra Leone. It is a real mess in that region. But Governments also have to act responsibly, and I hope that the Guinean delegation will not mind if I also say that it is a responsibility of the Government of Guinea to avoid the indiscriminate use of helicopter gunships if they also affect refugee populations, as well as the real targets of military activity. Some care and responsibility are needed in that respect in the context of the great responsibility that the Government of Guinea has taken on.

We are all asking for increased access to refugees and internally displaced persons and safe and secure conditions for agencies. They have got to be able to operate with maximum effectiveness, but we have to look very carefully at what the High Commissioner has asked us to do. The Ambassador of Jamaica was quite right to point to the short term and the long term. I am not sure it is going to be practicable for the appeal to the RUF and to the Governments of the region and the appeal to the United Nations to strengthen the United

Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) to serve Mr. Lubbers' immediate purposes. UNAMSIL is needed to help end the rebellion, which is part of the reason for the flow of refugees in a situation where UNAMSIL is badly under strength. Which does it make its priority, the short term or the long term? If it is the short term, the long term becomes longer. If it is the long term, as the High Commissioner is clearly pointing out, the short term is not mended.

I think we need the Secretariat's advice on this. It is very good that the Secretary-General is listening to this debate because there is a real crisis of choice here in what we are being asked to do in UNAMSIL's mandate so far and in what the High Commissioner is saying to us. I quite agree with Ambassador Durrant that we need an emergency plan for the short term that reflects the realities of what the United Nations as a whole is actually able to do, and that emergency plan must have as a priority the relocation of refugees in the most dangerous areas to adequate camps away from the border area.

I do not think that we collectively can hold out the prospect of safe passage as though that passage would be immediately safe because we want it to be safe. It would take, in our estimation, at least three full active battalions to create a route out of the "parrot's beak" into a reasonable area — say, to Kenema in Sierra Leone — one kilometre wide, to avoid immediate harassment of refugees. UNAMSIL does not have one battalion to move forward in its own area of operations until it is reinforced later this month and then later this year. So we have a real problem of choice. We need to discuss this further with considered advice, following the High Commissioner's briefing, from the Secretariat and the Secretary-General to see exactly what is reasonable between the short term and the long term.

Of course, in addition — you would expect me to say this, but I think we would all say this — we have doubts about the RUF's good faith in responding to the High Commissioner's appeal. We cannot rely on good faith alone. There must be a deterrent and a motivation for them to respond to the international community and for those who back them to respond to the motivations we have provided to make sure that they respond to the international appeal and bring themselves back into a setting of international standards that they themselves follow, together with their backers.

Lastly, repatriation must also take into account the capacity of the Governments of Sierra Leone, Liberia and, indeed, Guinea itself to absorb large numbers of refugees and to cope with the movements of refugees and internally displaced persons. The region must certainly be very much part of that. I am very interested in the revised proposal from the High Commissioner on what precisely the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) might do if it cannot do the borders, which I think at the moment it cannot do. We would be interested in a response in due course from ECOWAS as to what might be possible.

The United Kingdom remains extremely interested in this whole question for the sake of the refugees and as an investor in the security of the region. We are offering further money. We have put in an extra $12 million since December for refugees and internally displaced persons, and we will continue to be extremely supportive.

Mr. Jerandi (Tunisia) (*spoke in French*): Allow me first to thank you, Mr. President, for having convened this meeting and to associate myself with the words of welcome and thanks addressed to Mr. Lubbers for the briefing he has just given us on the humanitarian situation in West Africa.

My delegation is deeply concerned by the tragic situation that has been affecting millions of refugees and displaced persons in that subregion for some time. The deteriorating security situation along the border and the resumption of fighting in certain areas also prompt our concern and fear that these acts of violence could spread even further, thus accelerating the movement of local populations towards vulnerable but safer areas, which would worsen the humanitarian crisis.

Mr. Lubbers' visit to the subregion, in our opinion, was also very timely, and we thank him for having begun a constructive dialogue with the States concerned and for having deployed commendable efforts to find a solution that would remedy the situation and that would ensure, thanks to the cooperation of all the parties involved, the resettlement of displaced persons and the voluntary repatriation of refugees in full security. My delegation would like to assure Mr. Lubbers of our full support for his efforts, and we anxiously await the results of his initiative.

My delegation is pleased with the commitment made by the Presidents of Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia to respect the freedom of access and passage of these vulnerable persons towards safer areas, and asks the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) to support unreservedly this plan, without which it will be difficult to follow through with this initiative in the most secure conditions.

This is only the first step in a long process. The implementation of this initiative requires, in our opinion, a rapid response to a few practical questions, and we think that it is essential to determine beforehand, first, the authorities and mechanisms that would be capable of ensuring the protection of displaced persons and refugees, as well as local populations; secondly, the non-State players involved in the subregion so that we can be assured of their full cooperation and support for the principles of the freedom of access and passage for displaced persons and refugees; and thirdly, the authority or authorities who will be in charge of supervising the implementation of this initiative, considering that neither the Guinean army nor UNAMSIL seems to be able to do it, for many reasons.

We can reach this objective only with the swift and tangible support of the international community, whose contribution is crucial in order to consolidate the considerable efforts deployed by all the actors to contain this crisis.

The inter-agency mission currently in West Africa will allow us rapidly to define the key needs of the countries of the subregion; to assess the impact of the presence of refugees on the economic, social and humanitarian situation in the States concerned, particularly Guinea; and accurately to determine the pressing needs for urgent logistical assistance that would help to accelerate the resettlement process for displaced persons and the repatriation of refugees. Only in the light of the conclusions and recommendations of the mission will we be able effectively to determine the proper and coordinated response that is necessary. Hence, my delegation eagerly awaits the mission's report.

The refugee crises in West Africa will be resolved once and for all only when we have put an end to the conflicts and addressed their root causes. In this respect, my delegation calls on all parties to join forces in order to build the foundation of lasting peace and stability, the sole guarantors of development and economic prosperity in West Africa and elsewhere.

My delegation has always advocated multidimensional action in peace-building and urges the donor countries and international financial institutions urgently to reaffirm their commitment to and solidarity with these disadvantaged and deeply suffering populations in order to help them escape this distressing situation. Moreover, the repatriation and resettlement of refugees and displaced persons will stand a better chance of succeeding if they are part of an effort to revive economic activity and the social fabric.

I cannot conclude without reiterating once again my delegation's devotion to respect for the physical integrity of the United Nations humanitarian and associated personnel and the inviolability of its facilities.

Mr. Levitte (France) (*spoke in French*): I wish to thank Mr. Lubbers for having joined us in the Security Council and for having undertaken his first trip to West Africa, a fragile and suffering place that is of the highest concern to us. His Office has a key and essential role to play alongside the Security Council in helping the countries of the region emerge from their crisis.

The problem of refugees is a human problem, but it has also become a political one, a stake in the conflict. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) finds itself dealing with an essential political dimension that transcends the humanitarian aspect. It is therefore clear that we are partners in managing two different but complementary aspects of this crisis. It is thus fitting that we hold this dialogue on a regular basis and that we have a good understanding. I thank the High Commissioner for having clearly explained his vision of the situation and the directions that he would like his Office to take.

Like Sir Jeremy, I have questions and even some doubts about the cooperation of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and of the other rebel movements in the region, the United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia in particular. We therefore question the possibility of organizing a mass voluntary return that many refugees, such as the 100,000 Liberian refugees, would certainly like to undertake to their countries. I would ask Mr. Lubbers' opinion as to how

many can return safely to their country of origin. Of course, I am thinking above all of the more numerous refugees from Sierra Leone.

Mr. Lubbers referred to the role of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL). I fully agree with the Ambassador of the United Kingdom in saying that, having set personnel numbers that are now too low, UNAMSIL will have to focus its energy on its mandate. Perhaps, once those numbers will have increased in a second phase, it may be able to consider other tasks. A force of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was considered, with mandates that evolved as thinking evolved. Mr. Lubbers mentioned the possibility of assigning the establishment of a corridor to ECOWAS, but all that is still uncertain and would warrant a dialogue between the regional organization and the Security Council on concrete modalities.

As the Ambassador of Jamaica pointed out, all this will take time. If we follow that line of reasoning and focus our attention on the immediate emergencies, we agree that the voluntary returns cannot be very numerous. As a result, our duty undoubtedly lies in helping Guinea to resettle on its territory the very large number of refugees that it has accepted with such great generosity for so many years. I believe that our first duty is to provide more means to Guinea and to UNHCR in order to continue this policy of generous welcome while awaiting the desired resettlement of the majority of refugees in their countries of origin.

I heard Mr. Lubbers' appeal to everyone's generosity and I will convey his message in the confidence that he will have a positive response from France. France has already made a direct contribution to UNHCR and provided assistance to Guinea. We intend to pursue this twofold effort in order to help Guinea ensure that its army is up to the challenges that lie ahead and its authorities to welcome in safety the refugees they are willing to accept on their soil. France also provides direct assistance to UNHCR so that it may carry out the tasks entrusted to it.

Mr. Cunningham (United States): We welcome the High Commissioner. We greatly appreciate his rapid and forthcoming response to our request to hear of his visit to West Africa. We very much appreciated his briefing.

The United States is deeply concerned by the ongoing humanitarian crisis under way in Guinea and along its borders with Liberia and Sierra Leone. I want to commend the work of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Mr. Lubbers and his people are making a truly heroic effort to deal with this problem. Some of us have seen parts of it first hand and it is quite a difficult situation. The suffering of nearly 500,000 refugees and at least 150,000 displaced persons is, of course, greatly exacerbated by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) cross-border attacks that began in September 2000, which have thus far led to the deaths of over 1,000 innocent victims. These attacks and the ongoing instability prevalent throughout the region stem in large part from RUF activities and from the Liberian Government's ongoing support.

The Council's adoption yesterday of resolution 1343 (2001) represents an important step in efforts to halt Liberia's provision of assistance to the RUF and to other armed groups in the region. It is in keeping with our strategic goal of diminishing the ongoing violence in West Africa by weakening support for the RUF. If we succeed, we will have gone a long way towards addressing a central cause of the humanitarian crisis now threatening the innocent people of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone and, as I think Mr. Lubbers foresees, helping open the way to a return of the refugees in conditions of safety.

We support the urgent action to safeguard the refugees and displaced Guineans trapped in south-eastern Guinea. The United States has made $3.5 million in emergency funds available to UNHCR to support the relocation of refugees from camps along the border to safer sites further north. We gave an additional $1.25 million to the World Food Programme to provide food for the victims of the conflict. This is on top of the $54 million the United States already has contributed to UNHCR's global appeal for Africa. We are willing to consider additional support in response to UNHCR's needs.

We urge the High Commissioner to continue with the effort to relocate refugees and displaced persons to safer areas of Guinea and to devote all available resources to ensure the success of this mission.

Our current priority in Guinea is the prevention of a humanitarian catastrophe. We think the only way to do this is by assisting in the evacuation of non-combatants, including refugees, from areas of conflict or potential conflict near the borders to more secure

areas of Guinea, where humanitarian aid can be delivered in safety.

We support efforts to gather financial and political support for the relocation effort within Guinea. We hope the international community will join us in supporting this, and we recognize and strongly commend the Government of Guinea's continued hospitality towards the refugees, under what are very difficult circumstances.

The immediate need for protection and relief should be at the forefront of our decision-making. The United States does not support the creation of "safe corridors" or "safe passage" for refugees through RUF-held territory. The risks to refugees' lives are too great. The RUF is not trustworthy. Its past brutal treatment of civilians is well known.

I also wish to note that the United States does not support rapid, large-scale repatriation of refugees to Sierra Leone at this time. We need to be judicious — I think the High Commissioner used the word "prudent" in his briefing, and I am sure that UNHCR will be. Security conditions are unacceptable, the humanitarian network is strained, and 90 per cent of the refugees come from areas still under RUF control.

As the High Commissioner requested in his comments to us, efforts by the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) to re-establish peace and stability are under way, and the Council and the Secretariat are in the process of strengthening UNAMSIL. That is indeed our central task now, because a stronger and more capable UNAMSIL is essential to many of the things we seek in the region. The Council shortly will consider an extension of UNAMSIL's mandate and the augmentation of its force structure.

As the Sierra Leone Government, with UNAMSIL's assistance, begins to expand its control over more of the country, an increasing number of refugees will be able to return to a safe and secure environment. We look forward to that. We will have to give some thought, as Ambassador Greenstock suggested, together with the Secretariat and UNAMSIL, to ways of maximizing the impact of UNAMSIL deployments and how best to take advantage of its potential in the future, because there will be conflicting priorities and requirements.

In closing, I should like to commend High Commissioner Lubbers for his efforts to alleviate the suffering of the inhabitants of the Mano River States. We call on all nations to support the work of the High Commissioner and to join us in taking steps to reduce the regional violence that has spawned the current humanitarian crisis.

Mr. Valdivieso (Colombia) (*spoke in Spanish*): The information provided this afternoon by the High Commissioner for Refugees on the humanitarian situation in Guinea paints a disturbing picture given its dimensions and its potential for creating instability in this region of West Africa. It is a situation that requires prompt action on the part of the international community as a whole, including, of course, the Security Council.

We would like to thank Mr. Lubbers for the invaluable information he has given us and for the personal attention that he is devoting to this emergency situation, as well as for the efforts of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to alleviate the situation.

We all know that underlying this humanitarian crisis are deep-rooted political causes that originate in the conflicts of the past decade in Liberia and in Sierra Leone. For this reason, we cannot correct a situation that has claimed 250,000 lives and created 500,000 refugees and 1.5 million internally displaced persons by limiting international action to the humanitarian field.

We have to devise political and security solutions. My delegation feels that the Council should explore these options, especially during the upcoming consultations on the renewal of the mandate of the peacekeeping mission in Sierra Leone, in the light of the comments made by the High Commissioner at this meeting.

It is very clear that many refugees in Guinea are willing to take the risks involved in returning to their country of origin rather than be subjected to intimidation and violence by the rebel groups.

In this respect, we strongly support UNHCR's efforts to repatriate the refugees and to obtain guarantees from the Governments in the region and other armed parties to respect the principles of safe access for refugees and safe passage to other destinations.

We are nonetheless concerned by the conditions that await persons who are repatriated to Sierra Leone. In a way, the humanitarian problem has come back to its starting point. We are shifting the poverty, despair and uncertainty that prevails in the refugee camps from one country to another. It is clear that the Government of Sierra Leone is not in a position to offer recent arrivals medical care or educational services, and less so the means to start their lives anew. Indeed, it is already finding it difficult to meet the needs of the 300,000 displaced persons who live in the part of the territory under its control.

Accordingly, we must strengthen the Freetown Government's capacity to respond, with the generous assistance of international donors. We must provide assistance ranging from emergency aid to development aid. If we do not act now, we could be sowing the seeds for the next cycle of conflict in the country and in the region — that region where the United Nations has concentrated the majority of its peacekeeping forces.

We must therefore consider political and regional security options, with the cooperation of regional stakeholders. The resolution on sanctions on the Government of Liberia, adopted yesterday, sent a very clear signal about the determination of the Security Council to act with resolve.

We must now step up our cooperation with the other members of the Economic Community of West African States, including the Governments of Guinea and Sierra Leone, so that the sanctions will induce President Taylor to put an end to his support for rebel groups in the region. We have noted that the regional organization's commitment to deploy an interposition force at the border of Guinea has not been translated into reality.

Perhaps it is necessary, therefore, to review once again the options offered by the presence of UNAMSIL in the field and the results of its most recent contacts with Revolutionary United Front (RUF) representatives. Although the ceasefire still stands, the presence of returnees increases the number of civilians exposed to the threat of conflict, and, as a result, there will be a greater call to extend protection to the civilian population.

We would like to thank Mr. Lubbers for his comments, and I would like to ask him the following questions.

First, how does UNHCR intend to break the dependence on assistance which has come about as a result of the relief operations involving the returnees, so that these people can return to a normal life in their own country?

Secondly, how long does he think that the relief operations can continue before we start seeing the beginnings of donor fatigue and a decline in contributions?

Thirdly, what has the RUF's attitude been to the recent arrivals? Could such recent arrivals be a potential pool of allies for it in its struggle against the Government?

Mr. Ouane (Mali) (*spoke in French*): I should like first of all to thank you, Mr. President, for having organized this meeting to provide information about the situation of refugees and displaced persons in West Africa.

My delegation is grateful to Mr. Ruud Lubbers, the High Commissioner for Refugees, for giving us this opportunity to gain an overview of the situation and for informing us about the conclusions and outcome of his mission to Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire and Mali. I would also like to join with others in welcoming him here today. I would also like to say that we fully share his assessment of the current refugee crisis in West Africa, and we strongly support his suggestions and proposals, which we hope that the Council will follow up.

In this respect, I would like to make two sets of comments, and ask Mr. Lubbers several questions. First, I would like to express the great concern of my delegation with regard to the situation as described by Mr. Lubbers and to recall, very briefly, the efforts of the leaders of our subregion to deal with it through the determined action of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). As is well known, the current humanitarian crisis is a consequence of the conflicts that have engulfed the West African subregion for almost a decade, and the repercussions have led to a progressive deterioration in relations between the Mano River Union countries — Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Faced with this situation, ECOWAS has worked tirelessly to achieve a comprehensive and lasting political settlement. The measures decided upon in this respect by the twenty-fourth summit of heads of State

or Government, which took place in Bamako on 15 December 2000, are typical of those efforts. As we know, such measures are aimed at making the borders between Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone safe, and at restoring the strong relationship of trust between those three countries so as to put new life into the Mano River Union.

Specifically, the plan was, on the one hand, to deploy a multinational force along the borders of the three countries, and, on the other, that the leaders of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone take on the commitment, inter alia, to prevent armed individuals from using their national territory to prepare for or carry out acts of aggression in neighbouring countries.

The current Chairman of ECOWAS has also made numerous visits to the three countries, and in the next few days an extraordinary ECOWAS summit will take place to consider the security situation in the subregion, in particular the Mano River Union area.

With regard to the operational conclusions contained in the letter of 21 February 2001 from Mr. Lubbers to the Secretary-General, which were reiterated in his statement this afternoon, I shall limit my contribution to a few comments, followed by several questions.

First, I would like to repeat that we fully support the suggestions and proposals that Mr. Lubbers has made, particularly those intended to guarantee safe passage for refugees by setting up safe corridors. My delegation shares the view that our first priority should be to achieve a formal agreement between the Governments of Guinea and Sierra Leone and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), as well as the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone, on the basic principles of freedom of access and safe passage. In this respect, I would like to thank Mr. Lubbers for his confidence that the ECOWAS Monitoring Group can participate in the work of establishing such safe corridors; I am sure that he will provide further clarifications to counter the sceptical comments that we have heard from some delegations.

Secondly, I believe that further information would be useful so as to give us a clearer idea of the action plan relating to UNHCR strategy with regard to the RUF.

Thirdly, I would like to stress how right Mr. Lubbers was to remind us that the international community should treat the current crisis in West Africa as a matter for urgent attention. This is crucial. Certainly, the international community should provide assistance and necessary financial support, but the Security Council must show the necessary political will to re-establish peace and security in the subregion of West Africa.

Finally, I would like to ask whether the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, whose directors Mr. Lubbers met on the occasion of an important meeting that took place in Bamako, have plans to support specific projects for aid to refugees and displaced persons.

In conclusion, I should like to assure Mr. Lubbers of the full support of my delegation for his mission, and say how strongly we support him and his staff in the risks that they take in their work to serve the thousands of refugees and displaced persons in that part of West Africa.

Mr. Shen Guofang (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): First of all, I would like to welcome the High Commissioner for Refugees, Mr. Lubbers, back to the Council, and to thank him for his very detailed briefing. The Chinese delegation believes that the views that he expressed are very important; his proposals deserve our careful study and consideration.

China expresses its concern about the continuing deterioration of the humanitarian situation and the ever-more precarious situation of the refugees and displaced persons in the West African region. We noted that High Commissioner for Refugees himself, and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), are making efforts to alleviate the humanitarian situation in the region and have done a great deal to provide relief and assistance to refugees and displaced persons in the region.

Here, I should like to emphasize the efforts made by the High Commissioner and UNHCR to seek free access to and safe passage for refugees. China believes that the initiative of the four parties concerned aimed at reaching a formal agreement on the fundamental principles concerning free access to and safe passage for refugees is a very good one. We are very encouraged by the willingness expressed by the Governments of Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia to cooperate in this regard. The fact that the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) has also expressed its intention to provide certain cooperation in this area

is even more encouraging. Although I myself still have some doubts as to whether the RUF will continue to show that willingness to cooperate, we do need their cooperation.

China believes that the repatriation of the refugees will require much work. Of course, the efforts made by UNHCR and the assistance provided by some countries are important, but they are not sufficient. I would like to emphasize two points here. First, we should continue to support the work of UNHCR. Donor countries and the international community should contribute to UNHCR's special programme. China has provided humanitarian assistance to Guinea and Sierra Leone through bilateral channels. Although that assistance was not in the form of a direct contribution to UNHCR, it can be understood as being support for its work. Secondly, Mr. Lubbers has just said that the Council should take measures to strengthen the role of UNAMSIL. We of course support his proposal, which deserves our careful consideration.

The humanitarian situation along the borders of Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia is closely connected to the peace and stability of the region. Fundamentally speaking, the continued armed conflicts along the borders of these three countries and the impasse in the peace process in Sierra Leone are the root causes of the political and security instability in the region and of the deteriorating humanitarian situation in the area. The crucial issue in this regard is that for a long period of time sanctions have not been applied against the RUF. Yesterday the Council unanimously adopted a resolution. We hope that this effort by the international community can contribute to stability in the region and to the alleviation of the humanitarian situation.

China believes that the current situation in the West African region is at a very crucial point. The Council should by no means diminish its efforts. But we also believe that the role of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is very important. We hope that ECOWAS can continue to play its active role in this area.

Mr. Mahbubani (Singapore): We would also like to welcome Mr. Ruud Lubbers to the Council today, but I would like to begin with an apology. I am sorry, Mr. Lubbers, that I was not here personally to hear your briefing. One of the difficulties of being a representative of a small State is that we have many conflicting demands. I hope you will understand. One of the most pleasant duties I had as the President of the Council in the month of January was to welcome you for your maiden briefing to the Council. I must say that I am truly impressed at how, in the space of less than two months, you have brought such great attention to one of the biggest refugee problems that we face today. We are also very impressed by the letter you wrote to the Secretary-General on 21 February, to which we believe the Council should give serious attention. As I said, I was not present here when you gave your briefing, but my colleagues have told me that the briefing was impressive and that you have provided both a realistic and a hopeful plan of action to move the refugees out of the danger zones.

Like our colleagues in the Council, we too are concerned about the deteriorating security situation and its impact on the situation of refugees. We have received reports of continued attacks, which only serve to exacerbate the already grave humanitarian situation of refugees and internally displaced persons. Moreover, we have been concerned that the continuing violence may have security consequences for the West African region as a whole.

Given the situation, we agree with Ambassador Durrant of Jamaica that we should have both an immediate action plan and a long-term plan for the future. By the way, in this respect we are intrigued by the signs of willingness on the part of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) to cooperate on the movement of refugees. We understand the reservations and concerns that some Council members have about working with the RUF; but we believe that, for humanitarian reasons, we should work with them if we are to achieve the goals. I believe it was the European philosopher Max Weber who once said that to achieve noble ends, one may sometimes have to use ignoble means.

We certainly support the High Commissioner's call for the strengthening of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone. We also support his revised proposal regarding the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). ECOWAS being the regional organization of the area, its continued involvement is crucial for the success of any plan to bring about durable peace in the region. Here, again, I would like to agree with the point made by the Ambassador of Colombia — if I heard him correctly — that we should always work with regional stakeholders.

We would also like to express our deep appreciation to the Government of Guinea for having hosted — I would not say a large number — an enormous number of refugees on its territory for so long. This is an unusually generous move on the part of the Government of Guinea. We urge the regional and international community to give full assistance to the Government of Guinea, and to the efforts of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to reduce the burden that Guinea has been carrying for so long.

Finally, we remain concerned over the safety and security of United Nations and other humanitarian personnel working in Sierra Leone and in the refugee camps in Guinea. We call on all parties to allow UNHCR to proceed with its work unimpeded and in security.

Mr. Kolby (Norway): My delegation would also like to welcome the High Commissioner and to thank him for his briefing. We would also like to join him in his tribute to women on this International Women's Day. The Prime Minister of Norway has issued a statement in that regard in Oslo.

Norway views with increasing concern the humanitarian situation of the refugees, internally displaced persons and civilian populations at large in the areas of conflict in West Africa. Humanitarian agencies have only recently gained access to a few individuals among what may total as many as 200,000 Sierra Leonean refugees and Guinean internally displaced persons in the "parrot's beak". The humanitarian agencies still lack access to refugees who return through the areas controlled by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone. We understand that the redeployment of United Nations humanitarian workers in the region depends upon security on both sides of the border area. We have taken note of the assessment that an organized return of refugees through northern Sierra Leone is not possible in the current situation.

We understand from the High Commissioner's report that an agreement for safe passage for refugees moving further north was made with the Guinean Government during his visit. That is a welcome development. In our view, in the current situation it is of the utmost importance that the Guinean authorities and the humanitarian agencies cooperate in relocating these vulnerable groups.

In an extremely difficult situation, UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration have started an organized and voluntary repatriation programme for Sierra Leonean refugees, travelling from Conakry to Freetown by boat. We are concerned about the reception capacity for refugees in Sierra Leone. It is extremely important that the returnees do not become permanent internally displaced persons when they return home. The return of large numbers of refugees may contribute to the destabilization of such areas. We encourage the authorities, as well as the humanitarian agencies, to take steps to prevent further destabilization, if necessary with the assistance of the international community.

Over recent decades, the increasing number of internally displaced persons has presented the international community and the humanitarian agencies with especially difficult challenges. Very often, internally displaced persons are among the most vulnerable victims of armed conflict and complex emergencies. As a group, they are not protected by any particular mandated international humanitarian organization. It is necessary, therefore, to address these challenges on a pragmatic basis. Norway appreciates the cooperation between the Sierra Leonean Government and the Norwegian Refugee Council in organizing an internally displaced persons conference in Freetown later this month, aimed at finding practical solutions to the needs of the internally displaced persons in that country. The Norwegian State Secretary, Raymond Johansen, will participate at the opening of the conference.

Humanitarian workers carry out their relief and assistance work under extremely difficult and often dangerous conditions. In some conflicts, the warring parties have targeted humanitarian workers themselves. There have been serious incidents and episodes of harassment of humanitarian workers in West Africa. Hostages have been taken, and humanitarian workers have lost their lives. We strongly condemn such incidents, and we urge the Governments in the region to do whatever possible to ensure the safety and security of humanitarian personnel, as well as their free and unimpeded access to the people who so desperately need their assistance.

Mr. Neewoor (Mauritius): We thank Mr. Lubbers for his comprehensive briefing on the humanitarian situation on the common borders between Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia. The dire humanitarian

situation portrayed by Mr. Lubbers in his briefing is indeed very distressing. The appalling conditions in which the refugees and internally displaced persons find themselves in both Guinea and Sierra Leone are a matter of grave concern. Unless immediate steps are taken, we could be heading towards a real humanitarian catastrophe. The situation is certainly going to become further aggravated with the beginning of the rainy season in West Africa.

While we derive some comfort from the fact that the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Food Programme have been able to dispatch some food convoys to the "parrot's beak" region, where both the Sierra Leonean refugees and the internally displaced persons in Guinea had not received any food in five months, we are particularly concerned by the predicament faced by the most vulnerable victims of the situation — namely, the elderly, women and children. The death rate among children under five years of age in the refugee camps is still very high. According to a report recently issued by the International Rescue Committee, one third of infants born in the Kenema district in Sierra Leone die before reaching their first birthday. Such a situation cannot be allowed to continue.

My delegation welcomes the démarche by UNHCR, in particular Mr. Ruud Lubbers' personal involvement, in establishing safety corridors for the return of refugees. It is our hope that both the Government of Guinea and the military will extend their full cooperation to UNHCR for the operation of the safety corridors within Guinean territory, in particular along the main road between Guéckédou and Kissidougou, as well as the route leading to Conakry. Let me emphasize that we are indeed very grateful to the Government of Guinea for hosting such a vast number of refugees despite its own economic and other difficulties.

We are aware that some humanitarian organizations working on the ground in Guinea do not believe that safety corridors for the return of refugees to Sierra Leone can work. According to them, the refugees would not like to utilize the safety corridors for fear that no matter what guarantees are secured for safe passage they may be attacked by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), since the corridors would pass through rebel-held areas. These organizations prefer that the refugees be temporarily relocated to northern Guinea until the situation improves enough for them to go back to Sierra Leone safely. We would appreciate Mr. Lubbers' views on this.

The impact of the civil war in Sierra Leone and its spillover effect into Guinea have been the principal causes of the misery suffered by innocent civilians on both sides of the borders of the two countries. It is imperative that the leaders of the Mano River Union address the issue at the highest political level. In this regard, we welcome the appeal made by the President of Mali and Chairman of the Economic Community of West African States to the leaders of the Mano River Union to meet urgently at summit level to seek a negotiable solution to the crisis.

My delegation believes that it is equally important for the Government of Liberia, in particular for the President of Liberia, to be fully involved in finding a comprehensive solution for the safe return home of all refugees. In this regard, we wish to reiterate the demand made to the President of Liberia in the Security Council resolution adopted yesterday to stop all support provided to the RUF in Sierra Leone. The President of Liberia should also fulfil his commitment to UNHCR to adhere to the basic principles agreed in the discussions with Mr. Lubbers for ensuring a safe passage for the refugees.

We have no doubt that the community of donors and the international financial institutions will respond to the mammoth humanitarian situation existing today in West Africa and will contribute generously to alleviate the suffering of the refugees. In this regard, we welcome the meeting of the officials from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and the representatives of the Guinea Government to assess the country's social service needs in the wake of the humanitarian situation along its common borders with Liberia and Sierra Leone.

My delegation agrees with Mr. Lubbers that the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone must be strengthened as urgently as possible so that it can assist in the return of refugees to Sierra Leone through the safe passage that is proposed to be created. Mr. Lubbers has also spoken about the need to address seriously the problem of poverty, which further exacerbates conflicts in the Mano River Union region. We share Mr. Lubbers' assessment and call upon the United Nations bodies concerned to redouble their

efforts in this regard. We also urge the international community and the Bretton Woods institutions to put in additional efforts towards alleviating poverty in the Mano River Union region.

I cannot conclude without paying a warm tribute to UNHCR and all the non-governmental organizations that are engaged in assisting the refugees.

Mr. Mowla (Bangladesh): We are privileged to have High Commissioner Ruud Lubbers this afternoon at the Council. We thank him for his briefing and for the material that he made available to us.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) mission in the region is of critical importance, given the fragile security situation on the ground. As the situation in the subregion deteriorated with attacks by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) into Guinea and the fighting in the area, we had expressed our concern for the humanitarian situation, for the deliberate targeting of refugees, for the wanton destruction of refugee camps and for the targeting of United Nations and other humanitarian personnel.

We are happy that the High Commissioner's proactive role, soon after his assumption of office, has resulted in some definite improvements. But, the precarious security situation persists with the refugees caught in the middle, in particular in the "parrot's beak" region. We agree therefore that measures for protecting refugees and internally displaced persons have to be strengthened. One of the ways that the High Commissioner has pointed out, in fact he mentioned that this was the only practical way now, is through the strengthening of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) in order to provide protection to refugees. We still have to see this as a somewhat long-term solution, because efforts to strengthen UNAMSIL will take some more time to materialize in concrete terms, as other delegations have also pointed out.

But, we agree that the plight of the refugees cannot wait. The short-term and pressing needs of affording them protection and securing access to them have to be looked into. They may have to be relocated, especially those caught in the middle. We have to look at all options available to us. Here, we would like to pay a tribute to the Government and the people of Guinea for hosting a large refugee population for so long and in a difficult situation. We believe that in order to look at all options the Council should undertake a comprehensive discussion on ways and means with advice from the Secretariat, in particular on the feasibility of opening safe passages. We have heard the High Commissioner say that it is the best way. Others here and outside have expressed different opinions. There is clearly an urgent need for detailed advice on this and for further deliberations by the Council.

Mr. High Commissioner, you have mentioned cooperation by the RUF in assisting refugees in distress. Like other delegations, we too believe that we need to also put effective pressure on the RUF and not only rely on their goodwill for the safety of refugees and humanitarian personnel.

Finally, we agree wholeheartedly with the High Commissioner on the need to provide the resources that the UNHCR needs. This is a problem involving a massive refugee population, and more resources than are available now are definitely required. We urge United Nations and all other donors to increase their contributions.

Mr. Cooney (Ireland): Ireland would like to thank High Commissioner Lubbers for his briefing on his recent visit to West Africa. We commend him for his efforts and his achievements so soon after taking office.

Like some of those who have spoken before me, I cannot ignore the fact that today is International Women's Day. It is a sad reality that while war and violence are rarely caused by women, women are frequently the principal victims. In this context, I would like to associate Ireland with the remarks made earlier by Mr. Lubbers in regard to refugee women.

My Government shares the deep concern of the international community at the situation of refugees and displaced persons in the border regions of Guinea. We are glad to hear Mr. Lubbers' report of a slight improvement in the situation. We underline our support for the efforts of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the region. As the United States said earlier, relief workers on the ground are doing heroic work in dangerous conditions. We call on all sides to guarantee access to all humanitarian relief workers and to ensure their safety. Like others, I will transmit Mr. Lubbers' appeal for further material support to my capital.

All countries in the region and the wider international community have a responsibility to bring about a resolution along the borders of the Mano River countries that will allow refugees and displaced persons to return home. The Security Council has been active in establishing the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), in supporting the Government of Sierra Leone, in only yesterday adopting a resolution aimed at removing support for the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and in demanding that all States in the region take action to prevent armed individuals and groups from using their territory to prepare and commit attacks on neighbouring countries and from any action that might contribute to further destabilization of the situation on the borders between Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

I would like here too to express my Government's solidarity with the Government of Guinea and for the admirable solidarity of the people of Guinea for the refugees from neighbouring countries. We have listened to Mr. Lubbers' request regarding the strengthening and deployment of UNAMSIL. We have also taken note of his suggestion to establish a safe route between Forecariah and Kambia. It is obvious from what has been said, both in this room today and outside it by non-governmental organizations involved in the region, that there are differing views on this matter. The Council will have to address these arguments, particularly when it comes to examining the UNAMSIL mandate.

As mentioned by Mauritius a moment ago, it would be helpful for our future discussions if, when responding to the debate, Mr. Lubbers would also address the arguments put forward by a number of non-governmental organizations, including Médecins sans Frontières in a press release yesterday, in favour of moving refugees and internally displaced persons to locations in Guinea away from the border.

The President: I shall now give the floor to the representative of Guinea.

Mr. Fall (Guinea) (*spoke in French*): It is a great honour for me to speak this afternoon before the Security Council to discuss with you some of the aspects of the humanitarian situation in Guinea.

I would like to begin, however, by congratulating you, Sir, on assuming the presidency of the Council for the month of March and by thanking the delegation of Tunisia for the excellent work that it carried out during its presidency last month.

My delegation is very pleased to be able to participate in this very important Council meeting to discuss the humanitarian issue in West Africa. I would like to welcome the presence of Mr. Lubbers, High Commissioner for Refugees, and state how grateful my Government is to him for the interest that he has shown in the situation prevailing in my country, the Republic of Guinea. This is the second time that Mr. Lubbers has met with the Council to discuss the serious humanitarian problems that have emerged in southeastern Guinea. Soon after assuming the post of High Commissioner, Mr. Lubbers devoted his first visit to going to this part of Africa, which indeed represents a real cause for concern for the international community today.

Yesterday, the Council unanimously adopted an important resolution on Liberia. By deciding quite rightly to impose sanctions against this country, the Council sent a strong message to the authorities in Monrovia for them to cease their support to the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and other rebel groups operating in the subregion. As you know, the Republic of Guinea has offered a generous welcome in its territory over the last 10 years to an impressive number of refugees, as many as 800,000 at any one time — a figure that represents more than 10 per cent of its population.

The Republic of Guinea has been recognized as the model in the way in which it has welcomed refugees and in the generosity that it has shown towards them. There is no need to state here that the sole cause of the disturbing humanitarian situation in the southeast of Guinea is the armed attacks perpetrated by rebel groups with the support of the Government of Liberia. These attacks have led to the death of several hundred people, have caused much damage to property and have lead to thousands of people fleeing to neighbouring towns.

The camps where refugees were peacefully living in perfect harmony with their Guinean hosts have not been spared. The town of Guéckédou, which was sheltering a large number of the refugees, became a primary target. Today this town has almost been completely destroyed by the fighting in its streets. Recent armed attacks have created a serious humanitarian situation that the High Commissioner was

able to describe to members because he saw it with his own eyes.

Members will remember that as far back as October 1999, expressing her concern after the first rebel incursions across the Guinean border, Mrs. Ogata, to whom my Government pays a well-deserved tribute, invited the international community to do everything possible to ensure that a country like Guinea, which continues to generously assume the huge burden of refugees, should not have to pay so high a price. Alas, her words fell on deaf ears, and today the consequences of these rebel incursions are visible in the suffering of the hundreds of thousands of refugees who are dispersed in the countryside and the thousands of Guineans who have fled danger and death.

The tragic events that have taken place in the southeastern part of Guinea have caused as much suffering to Guineans as to the refugees. Bearing in mind the desire of refugees to return to their country and working closely with the Office of the High Commissioner, the Government of Guinea has already planned the measures necessary to provide safety for the refugees until they repatriate.

However, even if it seems that conditions of security have been organized within the territory of Guinea, the success of the repatriation operation requires taking into account the following conditions. First, we must set up and make safe a humanitarian corridor within the territory of Sierra Leone. Then we must identify and make safe reception areas within Sierra Leone. The Government of Guinea would like to assure the Council that it is keen to do everything possible to ensure the success of such an operation.

For those refugees who would like to remain in Guinea and wait for the security situation at home to improve, arrangements will be made, in cooperation with the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), to transfer them to new camps that this time will be far from the borders, in the interior of the country. My Government is confident that the international community will offer all possible political, economic, financial and logistic support to avoid aggravating what is considered by many to be a humanitarian disaster in this part of Africa, which has suffered so much from the consequences of the civil war in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

In supporting the adoption of sanctions against Liberia, the goal pursued by my Government was not at all to hamper the efforts of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), but to persuade the authorities in Monrovia to withdraw their support from the rebel movements operating in the subregion and to foster a peaceful settlement of the crisis in Sierra Leone.

My Government remains convinced that if the Liberian authorities would respect all the commitments contained in resolution 1343, adopted on 7 March 2001, peace and harmony would return to our subregion.

My delegation would like again to encourage the Security Council to do everything possible to restore peace and security in West Africa. The goals we still need to achieve are a ceasefire in Sierra Leone; stopping the rebel incursions across the Guinean border; security for all States in the region; the return of refugees to Liberia and Sierra Leone; national reconciliation within these two countries; and, finally, resuming cooperation between these three countries in the context of the Mano River Union.

Finally, I take this opportunity to launch an appeal to the international community for increased aid to my country to help us to continue to better support and manage the burden stemming from the massive and prolonged presence of refugees. I would like to thank all those Governments that have offered aid to Guinea within this framework. My delegation would also like to express its gratitude to the Council for the work it has done to maintain peace and security.

I also wish to take advantage of the fact that today is International Women's Day to celebrate the courageous initiatives undertaken by the women of the Mano River Union countries in the cause of peace and security in our subregion.

The President: I shall now make a statement in my capacity as representative of the Ukraine.

Ukraine shares the concerns of the international community with regard to the refugee crisis in West Africa and the urgency of resolving this issue. We pay tribute to the great efforts of the Government of Guinea to accommodate continuous flows of refugees. We agree that the highest priority should be given to implementation — with the active involvement of the region and the international community at large — of

the concepts of safe access to and safe passage of refugees. In support of addressing the regional dimensions of the crisis, my country takes an active part in the United Nations peacekeeping operation in Sierra Leone and stands ready to strengthen its contribution to the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) and to continue its support for international efforts aimed at bringing peace to other parts of Africa.

I would like to inform the Council that in addition to more than 500 Ukrainian personnel, together with the crucially important heavy equipment already on the ground, tomorrow, 9 March, a Ukrainian helicopter unit, with the authorized strength of 110 personnel, will be additionally deployed with UNAMSIL.

Today's very useful discussion is very pertinent to the open debate on the follow-up of the Security Council meeting held yesterday. Apart from a special focus on the challenges that the international community and the Security Council is facing in Africa, it highlighted once again the need for closer interaction between the Security Council and other bodies of the United Nations system, and in this particular case with the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). An important conclusion can be drawn, namely that UNHCR's efforts in West Africa would be more effective if they were carried out in the context of broader political support from the region. On the other hand, in past years the Security Council itself started to pay greater attention to the regional dimension of conflicts in Africa.

The situation in West Africa is a case in point where the Council simply cannot ignore the interrelation of conflicts. Mr. Lubbers' briefing clearly concluded that humanitarian action alone cannot be a substitute for political steps by Governments and the Security Council in areas in which they have an essential role to play in preventing, containing and resolving conflicts, thus resolving the problems of the refugees. I believe that the observations made by the High Commissioner call for a very precise role on the part of the Security Council in meeting the challenge of refugees in West Africa. The urgency of the matter requires that the Council give them most careful consideration and provide an appropriate practical response. I think that in this context we may need another frank discussion in the Council to ensure a proper follow-up and to move on to real action.

I now resume my function as President of the Council.

I shall now give the floor to Mr. Lubbers to respond to the comments and questions raised.

Mr. Lubbers: I will, of course, not repeat the many points on which we agree but perhaps will make a few comments on questions where there may be misunderstandings.

I will start with Jamaica. First, on a plan to bring the refugees in the Languette out, 130,000 of them, because of the continuous fighting, as was stated by the representative. I may be a little more optimistic about this. Because of the action to prioritize the safety of refugees, we have seen a remarkable slow-down of the hostilities and fighting in that area. That is precisely one of the reasons that we stress this point and put it as a priority on the agenda and invite the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) to participate in that. I am not saying that we can trust the arrangement permanently, but at least at this moment this is the situation. Nevertheless, we are glad the road is open and numbers of people are coming out, and we will assist them. We will concentrate on the most vulnerable ones. With other non-governmental organizations, we monitor the health situation and specific problems very closely. We will try to assist them as well as possible. But I hesitate to come forward with a plan to evacuate them all.

The second point is related to Sierra Leone and the intervention. It is my opinion that we can still have only limited numbers of internally displaced persons in Sierra Leone. They are now coming by boat from Conakry to Freetown. We can handle them, but I am not in favour of very big numbers. This relates, then, to my approach that, at some point, we need to have more territory in Sierra Leone where returnees can really go home to their own villages and the places they come from. This is, of course, a process that takes time, but that is the basic line.

I now turn to the representative of the United Kingdom. He, too, made the distinction between the short term and the long term, as, by the way, did the representative of Jamaica and others. I appreciate that. Our plans also have to be good for the long term. It would be stupid to have successes in the short term and not in the long term, but, having said that, I claim simply that what we did last month was good for the long term as well. It was good for the long term; at

least it created a moment of a little bit more stability. I would say that we should count our blessings there.

The second remark I allow myself to make is that, indeed, it is not the opinion of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that we should open the border from Languette to Kenema, as was said by the representative of the United Kingdom. There must be a misunderstanding. In the letter I sent on 11 February, I mentioned that this was the wish of the President of Sierra Leone, but that we at UNHCR preferred to be a little more cautious — not to do that, but to limit ourselves to the possibility of opening up the border from Forecariah to Kambia. We think this will require fewer troops from the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), but that can be sorted out.

I am grateful for the financial support of the United Kingdom to our actions and I do hope that there can be some further increase with other countries.

I turn now to the representative of Tunisia, who had no specific question. He supported our approach. He asked about the possibilities with the financial institutions. This was brought up by some other representatives as well. Yes, we were in Bamako, together with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, but frankly speaking, I did not get the idea that they were very focused on financial support. Obviously, this was an important conference and gathering, but it was not productive for refugees. We will see what is possible from here.

I turn next to the representative of France. He asked a question as to whether we had any impression of what the refugees themselves want in terms of staying or going back. He asked this for Liberia and he asked this even more for the refugees of Sierra Leone. At this point, I want to explain that the main policy, the first priority of UNHCR at this stage is to relocate, find safer places within Guinea. That is our main action. We are not in a programme to repatriate as many as possible, but, having said that, we appreciate that a number of refugees have an opportunity to make that choice. This is still a minority, but a substantial minority. I do think that, at this stage, from the perspective of the refugees, they want to have more opportunities. There is a certain problem with explaining to them that they should stay where they are and that we cannot allow them to go to Sierra Leone, in particular. I would add, because that was the question, that this is the smaller part of the total number at this stage.

I want to make a remark about the mandate of UNAMSIL. I have studied that mandate time and again, of course. I must say that the mandate itself, in my opinion, does not create a problem. It is not a problem of the mandate — it is a problem of resources and the numbers of troops. For example, I suggested that it might be possible for UNAMSIL troops to take over the Kambia area, literally, from the Revolutionary United Front. They are prepared to do so. It is not a problem with the mandate. It is within the mandate. It is a problem of troops being available or not available, and maybe of priorities in using these troops. I wanted to make that point clear. I am grateful for the support that will be positively considered by the Government of France, as referred to by the representative of France.

I now turn to the representative of the United States of America. I start with the same point of thanks for the financial support and for the possibility of even more. We certainly will come back to that point.

The representative of the United States of America said that his country cannot support corridors or passages through territory held by the RUF. That is not our intention. It seems to me that there is again a certain misunderstanding. The conversation with RUF is only about the Forecariah-Kambia route. That is in the context of the RUF's puiling out and its becoming UNAMSIL territory. We have other dealings with the RUF that are relevant to us, but that does not involve any action on the territory of Guinea. I am not saying that we should simply trust the words of the RUF. I would say that we should test its behaviour and that, at least at this moment, that behaviour does not give us reason for complaint. Nevertheless, I use the word "prudence" because we have to approach this step by step.

At this point, I shall also answer the reaction of the representative of Ireland and others to comments about hesitations among at least a number of non-governmental organizations. I think that this, too, is related to a certain misunderstanding. There is, of course, a risk involved, to be frank. One can never exclude the possibility that the RUF, at some point in time, will become more aggressive. Therefore, I would say that the UNAMSIL presence has to be robust, but one should not exclude the fact that the RUF itself also

has an interest, a political interest. One should not exclude the fact that the RUF has gradually come to understand that, given the fact of UNAMSIL and the somewhat stronger position of the Sierra Leone Army, with the assistance of the United Kingdom, its ambition cannot simply be to take the whole of Sierra Leone and that it must therefore also play the political position. In the context of improving its political position, it has its own reasons, its own political interests, to use less violence and to try to build a minimum of credibility with the population of Sierra Leone.

That is related also to other questions concerning the return of the refugees — where do they go, to what territory and so on. So we talk here, and we make assessments in terms of the past, but we can never forget that there is also a scenario for the future. My advice would be to be cautious, but not to overlook windows of opportunity.

What would represent a window of opportunity? A gradual decrease in violence, greater access to refugees, and passage in Guinea and at some point into Sierra Leone territory — territory controlled by UNAMSIL. That is the basic picture. Now this can only be done gradually, step by step. One cannot force things.

Here I should like to repeat what I said earlier: that I have some hesitation with the reasoning concerning the short term and long term. I would say that none of the steps, even the short-term ones, should damage the long-term perspective. If we can take short-term steps that serve the long-term perspective, why not do that?

I turn now to what was said by the representative of Colombia, who strongly emphasized the regional aspect. He had a few questions that were intriguing to me, and maybe also to his colleagues — two questions, in fact. One concerns the timing of a return to normal life, and how long will it be before donor fatigue sets in again?

This was one of the reasons for going there. There was donor fatigue, and it seemed that everyone thought that there was no solution at all in western Africa. That was the reason they tried to set a different political agenda, because we cannot accept this donor fatigue and this downward spiralling of the whole situation.

At least at this moment there is some movement in the right direction, but, to answer the question, I am reasonably sure that if there is no follow-up action, within a number of months there will be pessimism again. Now that things have started to move ahead a little bit, we have to think hard and go forward with prudence, but go forward and do certain things.

The representative of Colombia also asked me about the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). I will be very frank and open. One should learn from history and from past experience, so there is reason to be cautious. But having said that, other representatives, speaking after him, said that we couldn't afford to exclude the possibility that they will choose a different course. As a former politician, I have to say that they will go for a different course only when they consider it to be in their own interest. But it could be in their own interest, if they gradually change their role of partner in crime to a political entity in Sierra Leone, and that is the basic question.

It is very difficult to judge this, and maybe RUF is not as homogeneous as it is sometimes said to be. But to give some perspective and a chance to the better parts of RUF might be a good investment. We shall see, but I do think that the experiences of recent weeks are reason, at least, to see how far we can go — again, step by step.

Turning now to the statement made by the representative of Mali, I take this opportunity to pay tribute once again to President Konaré. In my opinion, he did a wonderful job as Chairman of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and is still doing it. I have very good memories of the conversation I had with him. It was not an easy one. He had to cope with the realities of countries that saw things differently, but I am convinced that there will be another opportunity — and, hopefully, soon — in the context of ECOWAS.

Maybe at this point I should explain once again the relationship as I see it between the UNAMSIL effort and the ECOWAS effort. The UNAMSIL effort, in accordance with the Mission's mandate, is to strengthen Sierra Leone and to restore stability in an acceptable way, and it is working on that. To do that, it has to strengthen its presence in Sierra Leone. The ECOWAS initiative has been developed more in relation to the borders, including the border between

Liberia and Guinea, which is the main interface for trouble.

I think that if ECOWAS, maybe in a somewhat renewed form — and I touched on this in my presentation earlier this afternoon and the discussions I had with President Konaré — could safeguard, in an effective way, at least a crucial part of the border, then that would be a good opportunity, as long as we can ensure that the behaviour of RUF is non-interventionist in the area of Guinea and that the military presence is coordinated.

I think that at some point the basic question will be that, if the RUF refrains from action, there are still many other groups in that area — all sorts of groups that could take action. If the presence of ECOWAS and the presence of UNAMSIL in Sierra Leone is sufficiently, let us say, robust, then we can challenge the RUF better. We can say that if something happens there, it is the RUF's responsibility, unless we can prove that there are other groups. I do not exclude the possibility that at some point it will be in the interest of the RUF to report to those observers, because otherwise they will be blamed for everything that happens in that area. I do not like to go into the technical aspects of this question, but indeed I see a long-term connection in the future between ECOWAS and UNAMSIL.

Turning now to the statement made by the representative of China, I would like to thank him for what he said. I understood his points very well, and I agree with him that we should not be naïve and optimistic and that we need to strike a balance between prudence and, on the other hand, the realization that we are at a crucial moment for West Africa and that we have to look into the possibility of finding a way forward. I very much appreciate the fact that the representative of China described ECOWAS and UNAMSIL as the two legs on which we have to walk to reach a solution.

I also thank the representative of Singapore, who spoke just after China and continued in the same vein. In listening to the various representatives, it became clear to me that there is indeed a wish on the part of the Security Council to make an additional political effort in relation to UNAMSIL, and probably, if it is redefined, to ECOWAS as well. I assure the representative of Singapore that we will be very cautious when it comes to the security of staff and United Nations people in general. I hope that the United Nations and the Council will be instrumental in assisting in security matters, too.

Turning to the comments of the representative of Norway, I want to thank him for what he said and, in particular, for the presence of the Norwegian State Secretary at the conference on internally displaced persons. This gives me the opportunity to say once again that internally displaced persons — not only refugees — in that part of the world are an enormous burden. I am sometimes asked whether UNHCR cares for internally displaced persons, since our mandate is refugees. Let me be very clear: in Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia — the countries where I was — I cannot make the distinction at all. I consider internally displaced persons, as well as refugees, to be our problem. Our people in UNHCR are instructed to look after them as well as possible, and I will solicit for support to continue to do that.

Turning to the comments of the representative of Mauritius, he stressed the importance of relocation in Guinea. I think he is right. We do that. However, I want to avoid the misunderstanding that relocation in Guinea is the complete answer. There has to be some perspective. There are basically three reasons why there should be not only relocation but, to a limited extent, repatriation too. First, there is the fundamental reason. It is not good to say to refugees, "We will take care of you and you will stay here; we are not working from the perspective that at least some of you can make the choice to go home". The second point is that when I acquired the support of the authorities of Guinea — the Guinean army — to work together with us instead of resisting flows of refugees and internally displaced persons — as they have been doing now for a number of weeks, with great success — I promised the Government of Guinea that I would try to increase the possibility of repatriation. That was a promise, so I feel committed. The third reason is that I am convinced that we should not overburden Sierra Leone with internally displaced persons but, to the extent that we can achieve a little — I repeat: a little — more repatriation in countries controlled by UNAMSIL, it will be very positive for Sierra Leone. The stability of Sierra Leone will probably be increased, not decreased, by it. I do not believe in the reasoning that says that the fewer people we have, the better it is for stability.

I have already answered the question asked by the representative of Mauritius about Bamako. Turning to

the representative of Bangladesh, I appreciate very much what he put on the table. It gives me the opportunity once again to explain that, to the extent that we relate, via the Contact Group, to the RUF, it is not because we are naïve about the RUF. Furthermore, we are not saying, "Today it is safe to go back to RUF territory". That may be the misunderstanding of a number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) — they may have thought that that was our plan. No; our plan was to see if there was the possibility of the RUF refraining from further action in the territory of Guinea and accepting that in certain places in Sierra Leone UNAMSIL will come in. We are creating a situation for limited numbers of refugees in countries controlled by UNAMSIL.

What does it mean for the RUF? They are trying to build a future for themselves in the part of Sierra Leone that they dominate, or will still dominate. By the way, they also need humanitarian support. My impression is that one of the reasons for their different behaviour today is that they see that they are in a difficult position, as they are isolated by the international community, by the NGOs and so on. I do not exclude the possibility that, therefore, they are trying to take another course. Once again, let us be cautious. The RUF is not homogeneous. We will follow it very closely. Now you may have a better understanding of our analysis on this point.

Turning to the comments of the representative of Ireland, I thank him for the support of his Government when it comes to the money we need. In answering him, I want to stress one element that is in my letter in relation to President Taylor and Liberia. We now have the measures taken by the Security Council — they are in place, they have to become effective. But in relation to that, I want to repeat what I said to President Taylor loudly and clearly. He thought that I was coming to him to ask him to be a sort of intermediary — a *porte-parole* or go-between — to the RUF. I said, "President Taylor, not at all. I know you did that in the past, and for good reason. But maybe it is better not to do that." But of course, that is part of the strategy of trying to decouple. It will be difficult. But I think that that is the way we have to try this.

The issue of the Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) press release is interesting. At this very moment, three MSF members are touring around in RUF-controlled areas to make new assessments. I consider the members of the MSF to be people on the ground with very sound opinions. But I have the impression from reading the press release that even in that case there is a misunderstanding of what our intentions are. So that can be clarified after this meeting.

Turning to the representative of Guinea, I want to thank his Government for its cooperation. We have met with them, and we hope to follow up. All of his colleagues listened to him, and at the very end of his speech he mentioned the repatriation of refugees as one of the things on Guinea's list. Practically all representatives paid tribute to the generosity of Guinea, and I think that it is fair for some consideration to be given to answering the question of there being a prospect, at least, of some repatriation.

Turning to you, Mr. President, as the representative of Ukraine, I would like to thank you, first of all for your country's participation in UNAMSIL. I would also like to thank you because, to paraphrase your words, you said the political priorities have to be set right and that one cannot expect the humanitarian workers to do their work if there is not a political effort as well. Of course, I fully agree, and I am grateful that you said it. You made a plea to your colleagues for a frank follow-up; that is the only thing I want you to do: a frank follow-up. I do this on behalf of the refugees. We are talking here of very large numbers of people. But this is not just about big numbers; it is about individuals as well.

We started this afternoon with International Women's Day. I said a few words about women refugees. Maybe I will end with that as well. On behalf of women refugees, I simply ask the Council to set the political conditions to make it possible for them to improve their situation and to see a future for themselves and their children — for their sons and daughters. They are just people like us. I think the Security Council could do nothing better than, as the President said, go for a frank follow-up.

The President: I thank Mr. Lubbers for his very good additional comments and for the clarifications he has provided.

I should like to inform the Council that I have received a letter from the representative of Sierra Leone in which he requests to be invited to participate in the discussion of the item on the Council's agenda. In conformity with the usual practice, I propose, with the consent of the Council, to invite that representative to participate in the discussion without the right to

vote, in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Charter and rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

At the invitation of the President, Mr. Kamara (Sierra Leone) took a seat at the Council table.

The President: I give the floor to the representative of Sierra Leone.

Mr. Kamara (Sierra Leone): I would like to thank you, Mr. President, for giving my delegation the opportunity to make a statement at this very important briefing. Because a lot has already been said, I intend to be very brief.

We will not be asking questions of Mr. Lubbers, so I am sure that after my statement he will have no reason to take the floor again to answer questions.

Let me congratulate you, Mr. President, on your assumption of your responsibility to direct the affairs of the Council during the month of March. May I also, through you, express our appreciation to your predecessor, the representative of Tunisia, for his leadership during the month of February.

We applaud the High Commissioner for Refugees, Mr. Ruud Lubbers, who, in a way, got his feet wet in his new job by visiting the West African subregion to see for himself the magnitude of the humanitarian tragedy that has been unfolding in that part of our continent. My delegation would also like to thank him for giving the Council a clear picture of the situation and of how the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the international community can, and should, respond to that tragedy.

Allow me to pay tribute to the Government and the people of Guinea, who have hosted Sierra Leonean refugees over the past several years. Like Sierra Leone, Guinea is a poor country, but, against all odds, it has managed to cope with a large influx of people from across the border. We do not know what we would have done without the generosity of Guinea.

The High Commissioner and all others who have spoken this afternoon have emphasized that the underlying problem is one of safety and security for the innocent civilians in Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia. The Government of Sierra Leone has already presented the High Commissioner with details of the problem and our views about how we believe the Mano River Union States and the international community can cooperate in alleviating the situation.

Allow me to put the situation in a nutshell: thousands of our people would like to return home. That wish and expectation to return is of course linked, first of all, with the level or intensity of hostilities along the borders of the Mano River Union States. Even if there is a lull in the area and the guns are silent for a while, there is still the threat of hostilities hanging over the refugees who want to return. That is not all. There is also the question of whether the villages and towns within Sierra Leone are safe for them to resettle. What guarantees do they have that the rebels who are still occupying towns and villages will not attack them?

We have already expressed support for the idea of "safe corridors", but that is only one side of the equation. Another related issue is the capacity of the Government of Sierra Leone to accept the returnees. As the High Commissioner can attest, we are already overwhelmed not only by the large number of returnees, but also by the thousands of internally displaced persons. The situation is complex and needs concerted efforts on the part of all concerned — including those who are waging and directing aggression and banditry within and across our countries.

We welcome the visit of the High Commissioner and look forward to the substantive results of that visit.

The President: I thank the representative of Sierra Leone for his kind words addressed to me.

There are no further speakers inscribed on my list. The Security Council has thus concluded the present stage of its consideration of the item on its agenda.

The meeting rose at 6.20 p.m.